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# The Inuit of Canada

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# **The Inuit of Canada**

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The many changes that have occurred in the Canadian North during recent years have affected almost every aspect of the lives of the Inuit who, to most people, are known as Eskimos (a word coined by Indians meaning "eater of raw flesh"). They prefer to be known as Inuit, "the people". The singular is Inuk, "person". Their language is Inuktitut.

Only about 100,000 Inuit are in existence, about 23,000 of whom live in Canada. The others are in the United States, Denmark and the U.S.S.R. Canadian Inuit live in small communities in the Mackenzie Delta and on the mainland coast of the Northwest Territories, the Arctic Islands, the shores of Hudson and Ungava Bays, and in Labrador. The communities are situated for the most part on bays, river mouths, inlets or fiords, reflecting a past life that was largely tied to marine harvesting-fishing, gathering and hunting. The settlements are situated in three jurisdictions: the Northwest Territories, Quebec and Newfoundland.

Early records and archaeological finds indicate that the Inuit of Canada once ranged farther south than they do today, especially on the Atlantic seaboard. Early in the seventeenth century they were reported to be living along the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and they occupied the whole coast of Labrador. In the Hudson Bay region they

do not seem to have appeared farther south than Cape Jones in the east and Churchill in the west.

The original Inuit were chiefly a coastal people, who fished and hunted seals, walrus, polar bears and whales. The Caribou, or Inland, Inuit inhabited the barrens and lived on caribou meat, and fish caught in the numerous lakes. The Inland population made their fires with shrubs and cooked with a mixture of caribou backfat and tundra moss, using this in a soapstone vessel, instead of the seal blubber used by the coastal groups. They rarely visited the sea—in fact, some of them lived their whole lives without seeing salt water.

For over 4,000 years, the Inuit or their predecessors, through four cultural sequences, have inhabited Canada's Arctic regions. Several Icelandic sagas describe encounters with people who are thought to have been Eskimos, and early European explorers of the Arctic occasionally came across people of the same type. The European explorers introduced the natives to a money economy and brought with them many new goods. This influence, however, was transitory. The real development of Canada's Arctic began much later than that of other Arctic lands. While Inuit in other countries were already trading with whites, many Canadian Inuit remained completely unaware that any men existed except them-



selves. Their isolation helps explain why they called themselves Inuit—"the people", the only people.

### *Coming of the whalers*

As early as 1821, British whalers ventured north into Davis Strait and Baffin Bay; whalers from the United States soon followed. By the 1860s, the whale hunt had spread into nearly all the navigable waters of the eastern Arctic. During the next decade, the hunt took such a toll of whales in this region that the American whalers began to turn their eyes westward, and so came into contact with the nomadic Eskimos of the western Arctic.

From the Scottish and American whalers the Eskimos acquired a knowledge of wooden boats, firearms and tobacco, as well as European clothing, food tools and utensils.

Trade brought with it diseases such as measles, smallpox and diphtheria. The Inuit learned a more efficient way of hunting and fishing when they acquired rifles, ammunition and clothing and tools that differed greatly from those with which they were familiar.

Inuit families were employed by whalers to man boats and to help run shore stations. When a ship was about to venture into areas where there were no Eskimos, large numbers of native men, women and children were taken aboard during the early summer. In the autumn, if the

whaler did not winter on the new whaling-ground, the Inuit were returned to their home territory.

If the ship did winter, the natives either remained on board or lived nearby until the following season. Though they received little or no payment for their services, they were assured of plenty of meat as long as the whaling was successful. Even during the unprofitable season, they were usually given sufficient food and other supplies to tide them over. Some fell heir to whaling-boats. After about a century of prosperity, the whaling industry came to an end in the Canadian Arctic. The Eskimos emerged better equipped in many ways to make a living on their own land.

Just as the bottom dropped out of the whaling market, the value of white fox fur soared to levels that made the operation of Arctic trading posts commercially feasible. Many whalers turned traders as the interests of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) shifted north to the tundra. In the long run, the influence of the trader on the Inuit was far more extensive than the whaler's had been.

The first trading-post in Eskimo territory was established at Wolstenholme on the south side of Hudson Strait. The influence of Fort Chimo (1830) and Little Whale River (1854) was felt along the stretch of coast between the two places. By the 1930s, the Arctic regions were covered by a network of trading-posts

belonging to the HBC and other trading concerns. By 1937, the HBC had stores in all the inhabited areas. Today it has over 50 stores in the Arctic.

### *Changing lifestyles*

Under the outside influences, the Inuit have gradually given up their traditional way of life. Those in direct contact were faster to adopt the ways of the outsiders, or "qablun-aat", as the Inuit called them.

Innovations such as firearms had a tremendous effect on the daily lives of the Inuit. From the early years of this century to the Second World War, the lure of new goods offered by the fur trade gradually involved the Inuit in a new economy. With it came the breakdown of an ancient way of life. This influence was felt in varying degrees over a million square miles of Arctic territory. Until the war, however, the Canadian Inuit lived a primitive nomadic life in a remote, sparsely-populated country. They obtained their staple food and clothing from the resources of the land and their other needs were generally bought with furs.

The Second World War and the rapid development of long-range air travel broke down the isolation of the Arctic. Airstrips were established in many places for defence installations, and to service meteorological and radio stations.

As other interests such as mining and trapping also started to move

north, the situation of the Inuit became a matter of concern to the Canadian public. In the early Fifties, therefore, the Canadian government began to prepare the native people for their role in the economy of the changing Arctic. Improved education, health and welfare services and housing, social, resource and economic development programs were begun.

### *Administration*

Since in every respect they are full citizens, the Inuit enjoy the same rights and bear the same responsibilities as other Canadians—for example, in regard to the franchise, federal, provincial and territorial law, taxation, land ownership and social services. Although the Inuit were excluded from the Indian Act, a Supreme Court decision of 1939 held that the term "Indian" as used in the British North America Act included them, and that the legislative responsibility for the Inuit was a federal one. The special federal jurisdiction nevertheless represents an extra service, not an alternative to normal citizenship.

Today, government policy is to give the Inuit equal opportunities while enabling them to retain as much of their culture as they wish, so that, as a group, they may make a distinctive contribution to Canada's multicultural society. To this end, the federal government, either directly or through the government of the

Northwest Territories, co-operates in the following programs.

### *Government*

The federal government has been committed to promoting the evolution of self-government of the Northwest Territories, with the aim of establishing a fully representative and responsible government in the North.

In 1975, two bills were introduced in the Parliament of Canada giving the North greater representation at the national level—Bill C-9, providing the Yukon and the Northwest Territories each with a seat in the Senate, and Bill C-59, providing the N.W.T. with a second seat in the House of Commons. The life of the territorial council was extended from three to four years in 1970 by amendments to the N.W.T. Act. In 1974, another amendment established a fully-elected council of 15 members and a speaker to preside over it. In 1975, two elected council members were appointed to the executive committee for the first time, one of them an Inuk. Elections held in March 1975 resulted in the first native majority in the council—of the nine members, six were Inuit.

In October 1979, the number of executive committee (Excom) members was changed to "between five and seven", and the position of assistant commissioner was dropped. A further amendment earlier in 1979 established a fully-elected council of

22 members—nine Inuit, eight white, three Dene (Indian) and two Métis.

Of 62 settlements listed in the Northwest Territories in 1979, 51 are incorporated or organized municipalities governed by locally-elected councils. The majority of members on these councils are native.

An increasing number of Inuit are forming their own associations or serving in groups with non-Inuit people—for example, in hunters' and trappers' associations and on the Game Management Advisory Council, which advises the N.W.T. Commissioner on hunting and wildlife. Inuit representatives have also been appointed to the Strathcona Sound-Training and Employment Advisory Committee, the Alcohol and Drug Co-ordinating Council and the Board of Directors of the N.W.T. Housing Corporation, Canadian Arctic Producers (a co-operative as of May 1979) and Panarctic Oil.

The N.W.T. government is following a policy of introducing "grass roots" control of individual communities by creating hamlets and villages with elected councils of their own, with most having Inuit majorities.

Such factors as geography, populations, the tax-base, economic growth and the administrative experience of the N.W.T. government have had a bearing on the achievement of self-government. The Territories are large in size, but small in population. Their revenues are low in comparison to their expenditures,



and will remain so until there is increased economic development.

### *Eskimo associations*

During recent years, Inuit have set up a number of special interest groups, which have been supported by federal funds since 1971. The most important are: Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC), the Eskimo Brotherhood; the Committee for Original Peoples' Entitlement (COPE), active in the western Arctic; the Northern Quebec Inuit Association (NQIA); and the Labrador Inuit Association (LIA). All these groups are dedicated to the retention and preservation of the culture and traditional values of the Inuit, to the Inuit, to the promotion of social improvement, and to the securing of aboriginal rights and claims to lands and waters historically used by the Inuit. The native associations have initiated numerous projects involving land claims, the Inuit language, the law, education and game-management.

### *Cultural development*

One of the main aims of the Eskimo associations is the preservation of Inuit culture. They encourage native artists, craftsmen and writers to seek national and international recognition and to take a leading part in the maintenance and development of the unique way of life of their people. This cultural program aims at the creation of a body of Inuit

literature and the encouragement of Inuit participation in the performing arts.

Since 1970, the federal government has been supporting these aims by means of national and international exhibitions and a program of public information and lectures. These activities reflect an ever-increasing demand for Inuit art.

In 1974, a contract was signed with Inuit Tapirisat of Canada to develop a Canada-wide acceptable spelling system. Regular cultural grants are now made to Inuit groups and individuals for such things as publication of literature and travel exchange programs. Inuit in the central Arctic use a syllabic system adapted in the nineteenth century from Cree syllabics. This system was developed by an English missionary, E. Peck. Others in Labrador and the western Arctic used the Roman orthography.

Since 1969, a number of Inuit writers have published their work and some Arctic communities have demonstrated their talent on film. Peter Piteolak, from the coast of Baffin Island, who was also a well-known photographer, portrayed with his camera the Inuit caught between the old and new ways of life. An exhibition of his work opened at the McCord Museum, Montreal in January 1980.

Cross-cultural conferences to promote Inuit understanding of southern conditions have been or-

ganized and video-taped for distribution throughout the Arctic.

#### *Economic development programs*

The Eskimo Loan Fund lends money to Inuit business people in areas of the Arctic not served by commercial institutions. Grants to co-operatives and other organizations help stimulate economic growth. To encourage full participation in the economic development of the North through co-operative ownership and enterprise, as well as resource-harvesting in the N.W.T., loans are made to trappers for food and supplies.

In the beginning the growth of the co-operatives was slow, because of physical isolation and unfamiliarity with southern market conditions and business practices. The development of communications in the North has rectified that situation.

The first two native co-operatives in the Arctic were incorporated in 1959 and, by 1974, there were 41. These are multi-purpose organizations engaged in the production of arts and crafts, in fur trading, construction, retailing and the provision of municipal services. In 1974, the value of their business amounted to over \$7.5 million. In 1979, total sales volume was about \$24 million, generating about \$6.5 million in local income. They provide income for over 700 people.

Canada Arctic Producers (CAP), the wholesale marketing agency of

art work and crafts for some 30 Inuit co-operatives in the Northwest Territories, became a co-operative in May 1979. CAP was acquired as a marketing tool for Inuit arts and crafts by the Canadian government in 1970, with the objective of turning over control and ownership of the firm to Inuit. In 1979, CAP had sales of almost \$2.5 million.

#### *Health and social development*

The basic N.W.T. social and welfare programs are comparable to those of the provinces. They are provided mainly by the territorial government. Some responsibilities for health care for the Inuit and other residents are shared with the federal government. The N.W.T. has hospitalization and medical services similar to those available in the provinces, at no cost to residents. Health facilities range from modern hospitals in larger centres to nursing stations in the small communities. Medical care is available to all people, and arrangements exist to transport the sick to southern facilities in cases of emergency. Infant mortality and respiratory diseases have increased among the Inuit, but the harsh climate and the low economic status of many natives still take a heavy toll. Infant mortality rose from 27.77 *per* 1,000 in 1973 to 32.2 *per* 1,000 in 1977. This still remains a problem and reflects the conditions influenced by an extreme climate, isolation, rugged terrain and changing lifestyles.

Venereal disease is still widespread, and is associated in many instances with the influx of workers from southern Canada. The aims of the social development program are to reduce infant mortality rates and to continue efforts to combat tuberculosis, venereal disease and other communicable diseases. The Department of National Health and Welfare has principal responsibility in these areas. Results, however, are dependent on other factors, such as better housing, improved water- and waste-disposal systems and home-management programs, all of which fall within the jurisdiction of the territorial government.

Tuberculosis is at the rate of 130 per 100,000 population, still substantially higher than the national rate in Canada. There were a total of 57 new reactive cases of tuberculosis detected in 1977. Of 797 people on antituberculous drugs, 176 were on active treatment and 621 on preventative medication. There have been no deaths from tuberculosis in the Northwest Territories since 1972.

Most Eskimos are now willing to report to medical authorities if they suspect they have T.B., whereas previously, they were unwilling to take tests or undergo X-rays, since these forms of treatment meant leaving home, relatives and native food for long periods. The new approach also reduces mental strain, due to the shorter treatment periods.

The North is not without its alcohol problems. The territorial alcohol-education programs, in collaboration with communities of concerned persons in various communities, now educate and counsel individuals, families and employers on the prevention and treatment of drinking problems. Several communities prohibit alcohol completely, while others have partial prohibition, by regulating the amount of liquor that can be brought in.

#### *Housing and community service*

One of the most difficult adjustments imposed on the Eskimo in recent years has been the increase in urbanization. Isolated settlements have become organized communities, and a sedentary way of life, with most of the amenities of southern Canadian towns, has become possible. Despite the good things that urbanization has brought, the Inuk-turned-townsmen still experiences much frustration and much conflict between the new life-style and values and those he had been used to.

Northern programs are intended to provide adequate shelter for all Inuit at rents they can afford. The homes that are being built in accordance with this policy are of a standard as high as possible consistent with the level of services available in the individual communities. An important element of the success of such programs is the participation of

the natives in their own operations and administration.

The main housing agency in the N.W.T. is Northern Rental Housing, which came into existence in the eastern Arctic and now serves the whole of the N.W.T. The rent for a house provided with heat, light, water and sewer services starts at \$5 a month. About 2,500 homes have been erected in the N.W.T. under the NRH program, which has paid high dividends in better health conditions and has played an important part in the process of rapid urbanization. Tenant associations have taken over the administration of the program in the settlements. Such groups have been very successful in developing community spirit and social goals with the common objective of improving living conditions and services in their own communities.

The Northern Rental Housing program contains a provision for home ownership as soon as tenants become financially able. If they desire to become owners, part of the rent they pay is applied to the purchase price. Ownership is hindered by the fact that, whereas fuel-oil, electricity, water, sewage and garbage services are supplied to tenants, owners must assume full cost of providing these services, and they can be very expensive.

Water delivery in the North, as well as sewage and garbage disposal, is carried out mainly by road

transportation. In some communities, Inuit co-operatives are responsible for the provision of these utilities; elsewhere they are provided by the Northwest Territories government or by private companies who have successfully tendered for the job. In communities with hamlet or village status, utilities, road maintenance and snow removal have been moved over to councils who, in most cases, have Inuit majorities. In larger, more developed communities, utilidor\* systems provide both water supply and sewage disposal. As settlements grow and become better planned, utilidors are replacing truck delivery and pick-up. New sewage and garbage systems are being planned, not only to ensure the delicate environmental balance is not disturbed but to improve health.

### *Communications*

In November 1972, a new era in communications began with the launching of *Anik*, the telecommunications satellite. *Anik* provides instant and reliable news and information to the Inuit and has allowed extensive use of telephones for inter-settlement communications, replacing unreliable radiotelephones. It has not only brought the south into better focus for the Inuit, but has facilitated communications on an

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\*Pipes, cables, etc., raised and insulated to provide utilities to communities built on permafrost.



individual level between settlements. Television and radio programs have been broadcast in Inuktitut, and it is hoped that this activity can be increased with more Inuit announcer/operators and managers for both radio and television stations.

In October 1978, Inuit Tapirisat of Canada received approval for a three-year \$1.9-million communications test project. This experiment will emphasize the role of Inuktituk as a living working language.

#### *Training and employment*

Wage employment is dominated by the white population, almost exclusively on the employer side. Government, the natural resource explorations and extraction industries, and transportation are the predominant employers. Employment ideas have spread north from southern Canada with little change, except in oil-exploration, where crews are rotated between drill-sites and home bases in the south. A happy innovation has been the introduction of this pattern of employment into some Inuit settlements.

As the Inuit become better trained and educated, they are able to qualify for wider variety of jobs. Many work as government clerks and translators; others are in the employ of private companies. Occupations as diverse as miners, carpenters, tin-smiths and storemen are now open to them. Among the jobs available to Inuit women are interpreters, nurs-

ing assistants and waitresses. The northern service of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation now has Inuit operators and managers on its staff. Some Inuit men have taken to the seafaring life and others have trained to become aircraft pilots. The first Inuit minister of the Anglican Church was ordained in 1960, and there is now one Inuit doctor.

The government gives high priority to the provision of training and employment opportunities to Inuit who meet their special needs and aspirations. In 1972, a special group recommended the establishment of a committee on the employment of native northerners. This committee is having some success in promoting native training and employment.

A Northern Careers Program has also been developed to provide money and other kinds of assistance to federal departments operating projects in the North to train Inuit, principally for middle management positions.

Government contracts are also used as a means of promoting native employment, by the insertion of special clauses requiring employers to use Inuit labour.

The search for oil, gas and minerals in the Arctic is providing employment for many Inuit in the petroleum and related industries. A recent example is the lead-zinc mining venture at Nanisivik, on Strathcona Sound, northern Baffin Island. A pilot project begun in the summer of 1974

by joint agreement between the federal government and the industry at this mine, affords employment and other opportunities to Inuit residents of communities on northern Baffin Island. The use of rotational labour by Panarctic and Gulf Oil in their explorations has also increased the number of Inuit workers.

The principal problem, however, remains the relative lack of education and skills. The dearth of operations in some settlements in contrast to the number of people available for employment means that some Inuit must complete their education in southern Canada, where counselling units help solve the problems of adapting to the south and to a wage-earning economy, as well as providing vocational guidance.

### *Education*

The aim of the Inuit education program is to provide learning opportunities by means of various projects from kindergarden to continuing and special educational courses for adults. Wherever possible, cultural factors are taken into account. More parental involvement is sought in the running of local schools.

A major concern has been the need for classrooms to accommodate the rapidly-increasing Inuit enrolment, which grew by 38 per cent from 1969 to 1975. In 1974-75, there were 4,689 students registered, not including adult, special and vocational students.

In 1955, the then Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources began a major program to build schools and pupil residences throughout the Territories to replace church schools and serve all children except those accommodated in the established school districts at Yellowknife and Hay River. Large schools and residences were built in the large communities and day-schools were provided in most smaller places. Assistance is not confined only to elementary and secondary education. Inuit capable of special training may be sent to vocational, technical or other training-schools in the southern provinces and further assistance is provided through apprenticeship training and job-placement. The N.W.T. government pays for attendance at recognized universities in southern Canada.

The development of curricula to meet special needs of northern pupils has presented a problem. In the early years, the curricula were closely related to those of the provinces to maintain comparable standards, and to provide northern children with the kind and quality of education that would enable them to compete with provincial residents. During the past ten years, however, the emphasis in northern education has changed considerably, particularly since the N.W.T. government assumed full responsibility. The most significant changes have resulted from the re-

cognition that the process of assimilation of native youngsters into southern white Canadian culture, upon which most thinking was based, simply does not work. It has been realized that mere acquisition by the native northerner of a transplanted southern Canadian education is not the answer to the problem of transition.

In recent years, new curricula have been developed that recognize the way of life, the language, history, heritage and culture of the native people. It is the policy of the territorial government to teach natives in their language in the primary grades.

Problems have been encountered in the introduction of Inuit language instruction to northern schools, as there are few teachers with a knowledge of Inuktitut. Special teacher-training courses are provided but to bridge the gap in the interim the N.W.T. is employing an increasing number of classroom assistants.

Concurrent with expansion of academic programs, more emphasis has been placed on continuing and special education. Adult-education courses are now offered in more than 25 communities. An outstanding example is the Fort Smith Adult Vocational Training Centre, whose curriculum has progressed from a single course in heavy-duty-equipment operation to instruction in more than 12 skills, ranging from nurse's assistant to telecommunications specialist.

The average Inuit child is staying longer in school and attaining a level of education far beyond what was possible for his forbears. A critical problem that has resulted from the very success of the educational program is the fact that children now quickly surpass their parents in the comprehension of modern life. The education of adults, many of whom speak little or no English and have slight understanding of life outside their communities, is a pressing need. While the needs of children will continue to receive the main emphasis in the school system, more attention will henceforth be given to the educational needs of their elders. The territorial government is promoting a concerted effort to include parents in academic up-grading and, through vocational and adult-education programs, to equip them to meet the situations they must face in the developing society of the North.













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